

HARD TO SAY

By

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Abstract

Hard to Say is an installation comprised of four artist's books that are displayed in a fabricated living room environment that includes wood laminate floors, comfortable chairs, a coffee table, a rug, end tables, and warm lamplight. All elements of the installation were either bought second-hand or borrowed from local friends.

The exhibition is named after the primary work in the show entitled *Hard to Say*, an illustrated memoir. The memoir illustrates the author's personal history through eight separate sections that utilize handwritten text, photographs, and hand drawn elements. These elements were combined digitally and printed in an edition of twelve full-color hardback books.

In addition, the installation featured an edition of 50 comic book style zines, a legal pad inspired participatory book of paper airplane instructions, and a hand assembled photo album of photos from the artist's childhood.

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Introduction:

When asked about his interest in photography, Ed Ruscha responded, “I’m not intrigued that much with the medium...I want the end product; that’s what I’m really interested in. It’s strictly a medium to use or not to use, and I use it only when I have to.” (Rawlinson 8) It’s for the same reason that Ruscha went on to publish mass-produced photograph books. The concept dictated the medium. The book was the end to the means. How I ended up publishing a collection of short memoir essays is not unlike how Ruscha ended up with *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*. The creation of a book was necessary. Despite my amateur knowledge of book making and book arts and at risk of favoring amateurism over craftsmanship, I committed to the world of book arts and memoir.

Even with a distinct vision for the layout and overall appearance of the book, its realization relied on self-taught Adobe skills. The same goes for the installation. The books that I created dictated their environment. The books stay the same regardless of how they are presented, but the installation provides additional context to the work. Though I discuss the books as a separate entity, each component of my thesis show depended on the parts that came before it. Therefore, I must ultimately discuss the books and installation not as separate entities, but as one. As a whole, I wanted the flow of the book to start off simply, because I wanted people to take the book seriously. The stories toward the middle introduce humor; because I not only love making people laugh, but tend to use joking as a coping mechanism. I wanted to end with the most powerful of the stories, and the story that I wanted the viewer to walk away remembering.

Hard To Say

The Process:

A good memoir tells stories with intimate specific details about the author's experiences at the same time as it distills these stories into universal experiences that the reader can relate to. I knew I wanted to tell stories. I knew that they had to be personal. But I didn't know which stories were the right ones—so I began by writing down every significant story or detail from my childhood. At the time I began this process, I was experiencing some health issues and found myself in and out of the hospital. Being in this environment brought up some difficult memories of my mother's hospitalization when I was young. So the initial stories revolved around hospitals and illness. This initial set of stories felt like they were only scratching the surface, so I decided to delve deeper into my memories and figure out what was at the core of these stories that held my interest.

I began looking for patterns and commonalities between this first collection of stories and I realized that many of the stories of my illnesses shared a common theme. Each time I was really sick as a child, I had a difficult time admitting that I needed help. I realized that that lack of communication, or non-verbal communication, was a big part of my youth. Once I had realized this reoccurrence, I knew that this theme would connect the stories in my book.

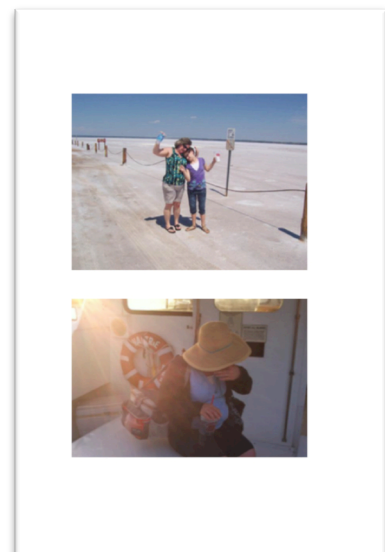
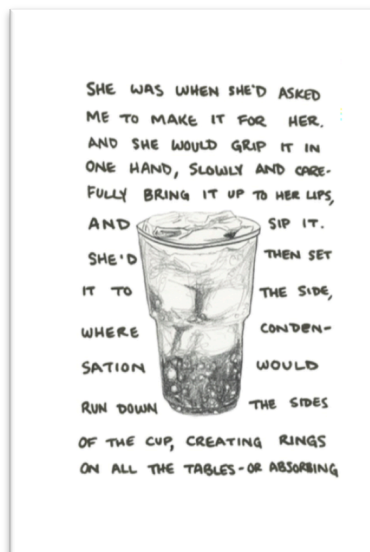
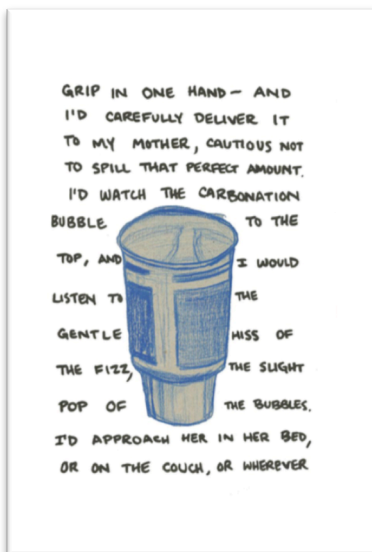
I have always had a problem with confrontation, especially within my family, so I wanted the book to address the fact that these stories from my past have made me into an extremely non-confrontational adult—something I see as a weakness. The act of writing these stories down, and then letting others read them allowed me to reveal intimate stories about myself, but in what is ultimately a non-confrontational manner. Because of this, to help me to communicate some of the things I have never been able talk about—like memories of my mother in the hospital.

The title, *Hard to Say*, followed naturally. The saying has a double meaning in this instance. The stories talk about things that, in my past, I have literally found difficult to talk about. But also, the expression “hard to say,” describes the fuzzy state of memory and the difficulty involved in retelling stories that happened in the past.

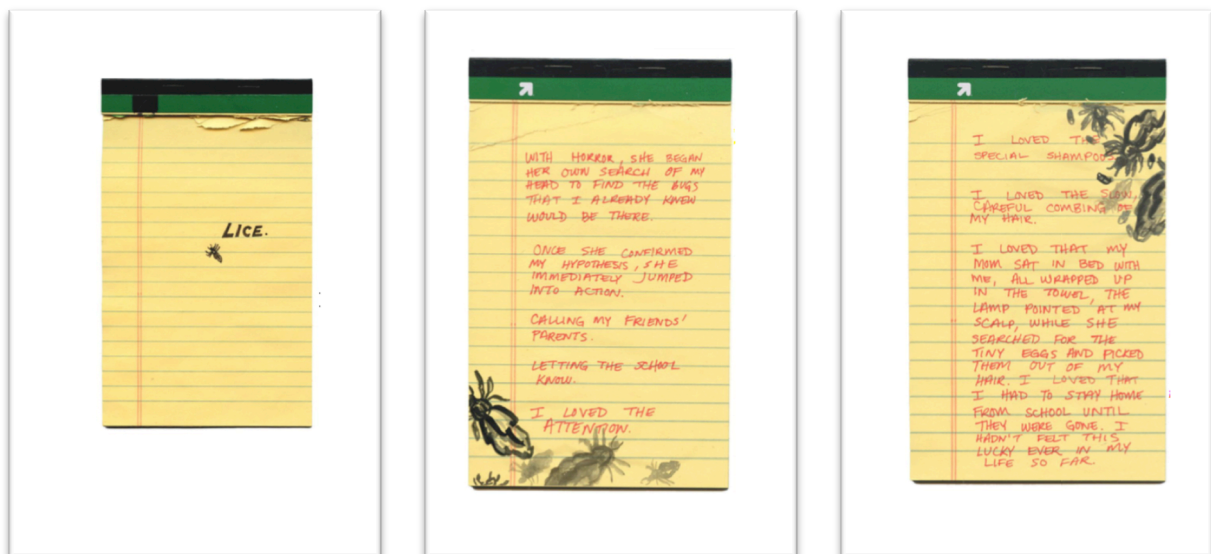
The final collection is made up of eight stories that incorporate a variety of handwritten text alongside hand drawn illustrations and digital photographs.

The Stories:

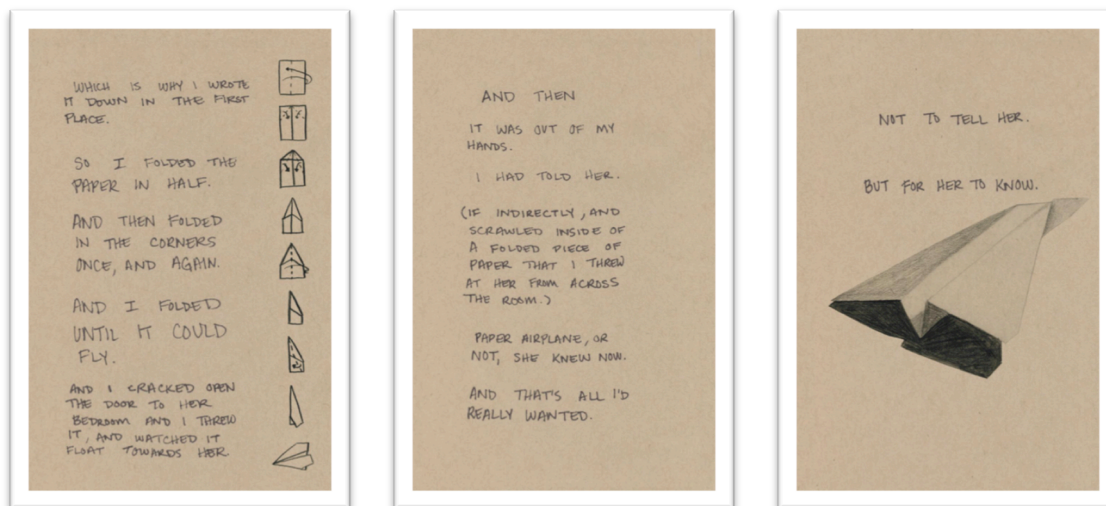
The first story, *Plastic Cups*, operates as a metaphor. It's about trying again and again to please my mother, and do things perfectly for her. I use the gesture of bringing her this comfort item as a means of communicating love and care. But on another level, it's about tiny details that surround the memories of my mother. That's why I included the page of photos with my mother holding a cup of soda in each one—it is almost impossible to separate the image of the soda cup from early memories of my mom.



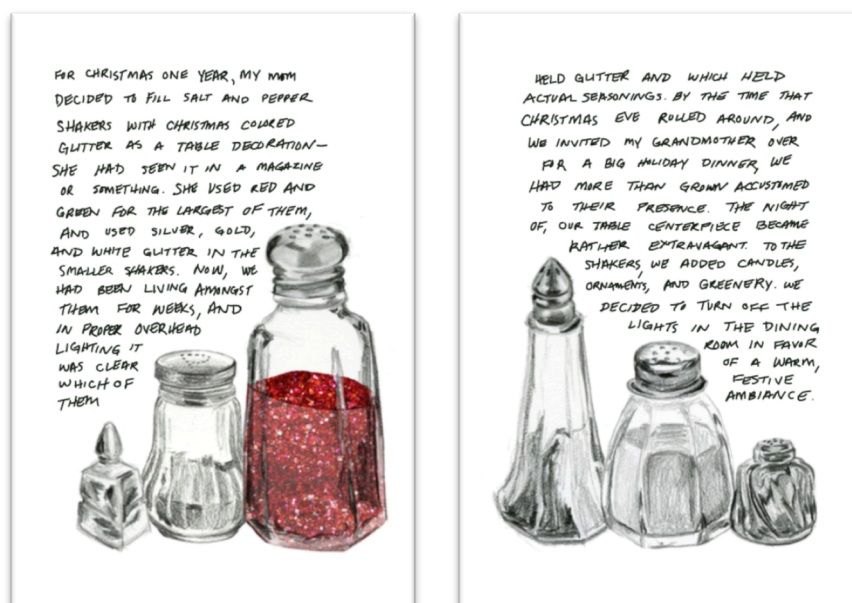
Lice is a short story about a little girl who wants intimacy with a mother that she has a hard time asking for help, and who finds solace in an ailment because she gets a quiet moment with her mom. Despite not wanting to talk to my mom about this serious matter, I know that I can't get rid of the lice without her help. The story remembers how nice it felt to be the center of attention in a busy household, even if it is because of an ailment. It reminds me how much better you can feel if you just get over that initial fear of opening up to someone and asking for help.



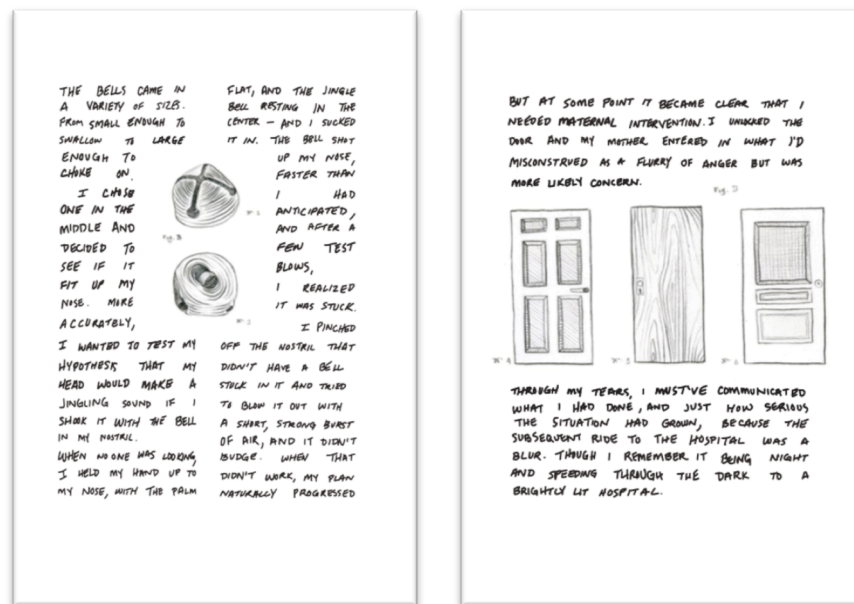
Paper Planes has a little bit of a different feel to it than the rest of the stories. I wrote it from the perspective of my twelve year old self's internal monologue. It's about a point in my life where it was so impossible to confront my mother that I resorted to non-verbal communication. The thoughts are ridden with anxiety. This style of writing was an attempt to write a story that was very relatable to other people who have experienced a similar train of thought.



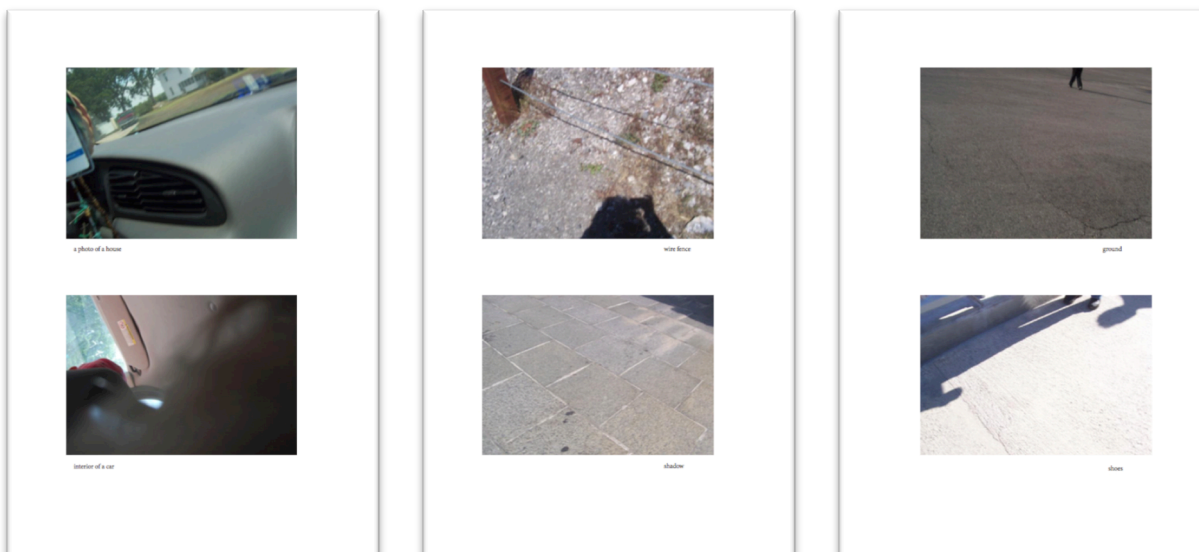
Salt and Pepper Shakers is a short, humorous interlude. At Christmas dinner, my grandmother mistakes glitter filled saltshakers—a Christmas decoration—for salt. It's a story where something gets lost in translation, resulting in disastrous, if hilarious, consequences. It's a simple, funny anecdote—one repeated at family gatherings—but more than that it operates as a metaphor. It shows how easily those around you can suffer consequences if you sacrifice clarity in communication.



Continuing the humorous tone, Jingle Bell is a story that always embarrasses me to tell, so I felt obligated to include it. Telling that story, and finally being able to laugh about it was a helpful part of my process in writing this. While humorous, it adds a little bit more depth to the ongoing theme of not being able to admit to needing help. In this case, I was so unwilling to admit what I had done and tried so hard to fix the problem myself that the situation got much worse than if I'd sought help in the first place, a problem I still have to this day.



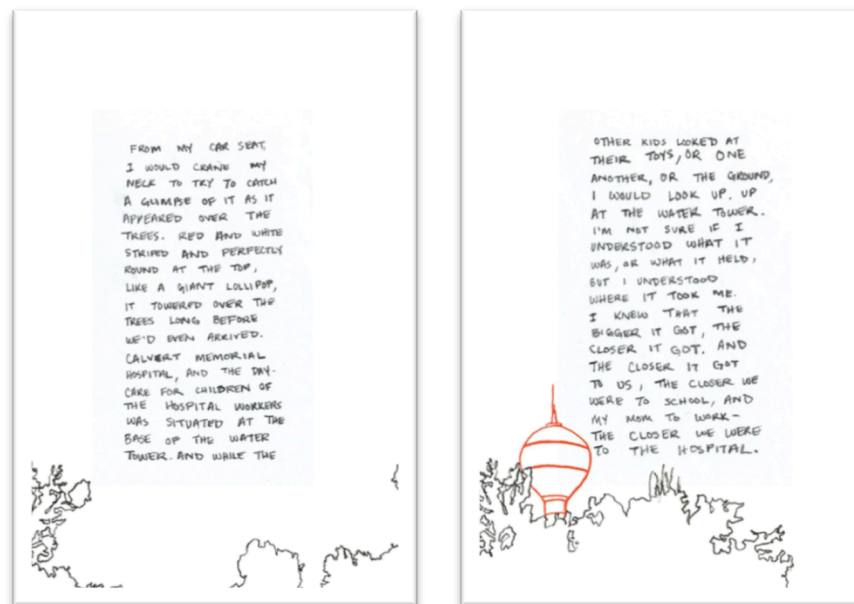
The section with the vacation photos—that ultimately get their own separate book in the show--a photo album full of them—has little text, but is a direct metaphor for a lack of communication. Photos that, when taken, were meant to preserve a memory, or to be brought back and shared with family and friends, are missing vital information. Each photo is a real photo that people in my family have taken, and kept. The captions add a sarcastic tone to the photos, where I attempt to describe what is in the photo. These captions highlight the inability to use context from the photos to describe what was happening at the time of their creation and what subject the photographer actually captured.



The second-to-last story, A House Reset, was a breakthrough for me. To me, it's the most important story in the book. I have been struggling with the memory of my mother's hospitalization for several years now, and it's something that no one in my family talks about. I tried to only tell my side of the story. It's something that happened to her, but I wanted to talk about how it affected me. I wanted to stay true to what I remembered most about that time, a time that is overflowing with cloudy, yet painful memories.



The final pages address the image that has been scattered throughout the book of the water tower getting closer and closer through the trees. The object was my earliest memory of using something as an anchor—of being able to situate myself in space. It's an object that as a child held a sense of wonder, and then as an adolescent, represented a place of dread. It's an important symbolic object and the object itself communicated to me how close we were to our destination.



Style and The Drawings:

The handwritten style of the pages reference diary and journaling, and the sketches and drawings reference the art of visual journaling or keeping and artist's sketchbook. Since I wanted to create multiples, I needed to find a way for the book to appear handwritten and hand drawn but exist in a reproducible form. Though the digitalization of the drawings and writing loses some of the subtlety and surface quality of the originals, the printing preserves the handmade essence of the many components that make up the finished collection.

The drawings in the book encompass full value graphite drawing, watercolor paintings, and cross contour “encyclopedia style” drawings. I feel the drawings operate more as fine art

illustrations than traditional “graphic memoir” style illustrations, such as

in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. In

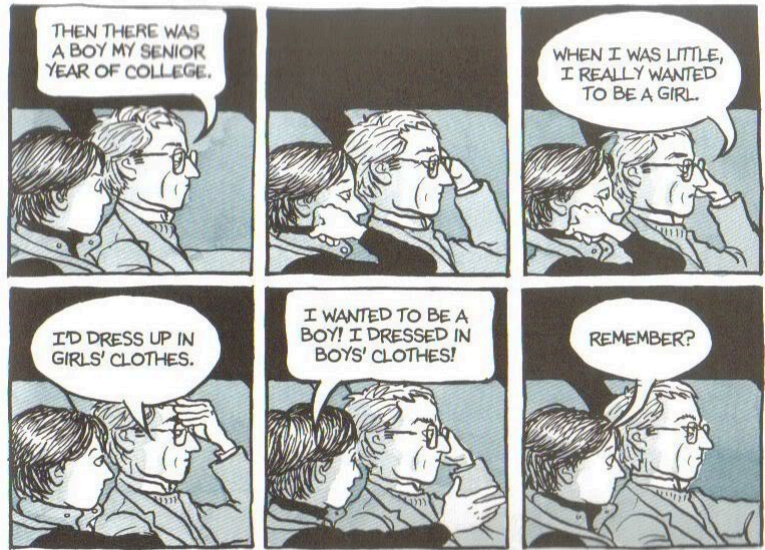
Fun Home, the drawings, as much as

the text, drive the narrative. The

drawn elements in *Hard to Say*

illustrate symbolic objects rather

than the characters involved in the



story. However, the process of creating the illustrations is similar. Bechdel’s process, as stated in

her video entitled “OCD,” involves “[re]enacting every pose.” She sets a camera on a tripod and

uses her own body to act out the poses of every character that she draws, including props.

Similarly, when attempting to create the illustrations for *Hard to Say*, I would set up props and

draw them from life, or draw source imagery from old photos.

For the water tower drawings that occur throughout the book, I drew from video stills

from footage taken of the actual water tower in Prince Frederick, MD. It was important to me in

this case, to use a recording the actual object instead of recreating the phenomenon from

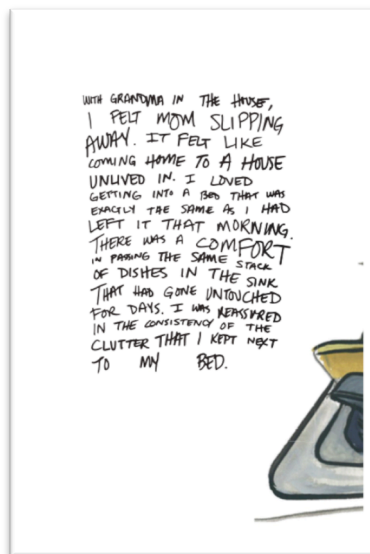
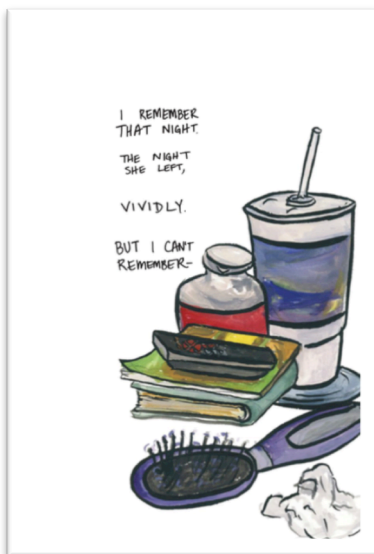
memory. The footage recreates how the water tower looked as it would begin to peek above the

tree line, and in order to ensure the perfect shots, the videographer drove up and down the street

approaching the hospital from both directions and filming the subject.



Drawings for the story *A House Reset* illustrate the cluttered state of my childhood home, but are drawn from recreations—photos taken of cluttered sinks and overflowing hampers. Though the story itself is not all about chaos, the drawings of messes highlight the story’s themes of sterility vs. clutter, and wiping things clean.



Ethics:

Knowing that my mother would read the book, I hoped that it would be a way to open up conversations about these difficult topics with her. This put me, as an artist, and as a person, into an extremely vulnerable position. Though the details in each story are, to the best of my

knowledge, entirely factual, there are still ethical concerns involved in the art of life writing. Since, “every account of the self includes relations with others,” it is difficult to “tell a story without violating the other’s privacy...without doing harm, but nonetheless telling the story from one’s own perspective.” (Miller 153) Each person has their own version of the truth. My mother’s perspective of the story “Jingle Bell” would be much different, as she couldn’t see what was happening behind the closed door. For this book, I decided to remain as true to telling my own version of each story, from my perspective.

The challenge was the greatest when writing “A House Reset.” My mother’s hospitalization is something that happened predominately to her. My perspective on the story is much different than hers, since I don’t know what happened inside the walls of the hospital, or inside of her mind. I began by identifying the most prominent part of the memories I have of that time. Mostly I remembered the relief I felt when she was finally put into the hospital—relief that she was getting help, but also relief that this situation that I couldn’t control or improve was being resolved. I changed the scope of the story many times before deciding to tell the story of what happened in our house while she was gone, and how I felt about her absence. I decided this was the most ethical way to approach the story, and also the least likely to misinterpret the details and risk damaging my mother’s feelings.

But even the possible betrayal of my mother couldn’t prevent me from telling my story. Claudia Mills calls this the source of “tension in a writer’s life: we can’t use our most interesting family stories as material, but we can’t give them up, either.” (105) A memory that is distressing to me could be shameful to my mother. Therefore, writing about this memory and allowing the public to read about it is a risk, and must be handled with finesse and caution.

Additional Books:

Once the collection of stories was complete, I was able to create several handmade books that expand on individual stories from the main collection. Making these books allowed me to retell these stories in a different way.

I was able to take the vacation photos that are included in the main book out of context of the collection and into a more traditional format—a photo album. Instead of using the same digital photos from *Hard to Say*, I went through old printed photos in my mother’s collection to find photos. Each photo was then reproduced as a painting. The act of rescuing the photos and then lovingly observing and recreating the images preserves the haphazardly captured moments. Placing them into their own album then elevates the photos from rejected trash, to moments intended to be saved and shared with loved ones. The choice to paint reproductions of the photos represented the mediation of the images and memories through my mind and body.

Because my research involved many more traditional graphic novels, I wanted to try my hand at a more traditional “graphic novel” or “comic” style. I was able to do so by re-imagining the story “Lice” from the memoir as a comic, or “zine.” The story is told through narrative text written on a yellow legal pad in *Hard to Say*. The only illustrations are ink paintings of lice and lice eggs that gradually become more numerous and more opaque on the pages. Since the story was so visual in nature in my memory, I chose to limit the amount of text I used in the reiteration of the story, resulting in a narrative driven by image. The experiment of creating the same tone and emotion in both representations of the same story was a challenge. To link the two, I used a direct quote from the original story in the comic, and a similar illustration style as the one used in the original drawings.

Though I felt that “Paper Planes,” was a strong piece on its own because of its ability to connect with the readers, I wanted to add a participatory element in order to further that connection. I created a “legal pad,” with the title “How to Break Difficult News” written on its cover, where, instead of blank pages with lines, each page was printed with the directions to fold a paper airplane. This was a way for my to poke fun at the absurdity of a paper airplane as a tool for confrontation, but it also allowed viewers an opportunity to reenact a moment from the story.

The Installation:

The final book does not necessarily lend itself to traditional gallery display. Despite endless edits, cuts, revisions, drawings, and handwritten words, the book ends up as a singular object. Entire stories were replaced with new ones, or cut entirely. Drawings were drawn, and redrawn. Layouts were assembled, and then rearranged completely. The book is a process driven artifact.

So when faced with the dilemma of displaying this artifact, one is forced to choose between process and product. You offer a vastly different experience to viewers in the display of preliminary drawings or early layout sketches than you do in the much more simple display of the book as finished product.

In the tradition of painters, ceramicists, and printmakers, I chose to offer viewers a finished product, which they are invited to intervene with. The book, much like the painting, offers hints at the artist’s process, without exposing every step. But, the thought of just a book on a pedestal seemed intimidating and alienating. And often book works get overlooked or passed by because they require a lot of time and attention from viewers. I wanted the viewers to know right away that my intention was for them to be able to handle the books. The result was a “pop-

up” living room space that housed multiple copies of *Hard to Say*, and each of the handmade books. The living room consisted of warm lamplight, coffee tables and end table to rest the books, and the viewers’ belongings, a cozy rug, and comfortable tufted seating. This environment allows for viewers to enjoy reading my book in the gallery in the same way they



might if they were at home. It offers a chance to spend a longer length of time with the book, or to take time out of their day to read the stories. It intrigues the viewer to come in, crack the cover, and spend time with the work.



Further, this installation of the book offered a chance for multiple viewers in the space to have some sort of connection with one another while they interact with the books. The way they interact adds depth to the themes of the book about lack of communication, as well as non-verbal communication.

Participation:

To some degree, all art requires a degree of participation from its viewer, if only a passive one. The art cannot achieve its purpose if, as a viewer, you refuse to look at it. The artist's book requires a much more active form of participation. It requires a time commitment. It demands the physical turning of its pages to absorb all of its content. Rudolf Frieling, in the introduction to "The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now," calls participatory art "on open invitation," and goes on to assert that "the viewers' refusal to participate, or the participation of only a small number of people, counts as much as total physical engagement."

My hope was to create an environment that helped to lure viewers in, and increase the likelihood that they would sacrifice their time in order to read the book in its entirety.



Participatory art aims to create a higher level of involvement with the work. By allowing viewers a more intimate perspective, the artist “regain[s] common ground with their audiences by enticing viewers out of their passive roles, bridging the comfortable aesthetic distance that allows uninvolved viewers to judge an artwork impartially from a secure, external perspective.” (Groys 21) It is shortening this distance that allows readers to make an emotional connection to the stories, and in turn, the artist.





Conclusion:

The final presentation of this work went through many stages. First, the creation of *Hard To Say* inspired the creation of three other books. Once these books were made, they needed a place to be viewed—but not just viewed, experienced. Handwritten text, personal stories, and an inviting environment work together to create the optimal reading experience for viewers. If the viewer does not come into the space and read the book, they are missing out on the core of the show. Unlike paintings on a wall, the viewer can't see all that there is to see in one stroll around the gallery. The work demands time from its viewer, and therefore rewards those who are willing to give it time. And that is for whom the work was made.

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